

Syrian Road to Justice

In June 2020, coinciding with the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Syrian feminist organizations: Badael, Dawlaty, Women Now for Development, and the Syrian Female Journalists Network, as well as The Syria Campaign, launched the 'Syrian Road to Justice' campaign.

This campaign advocates for greater legal access to justice for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) perpetrated over the past ten years in the Syrian detention centers, especially for women survivors who face particular barriers to justice.

Survivors of SGBV in detention, and particularly female survivors, are discriminated against within society in multiple ways, from the social, economic and political to both public and private life. They often face a lifetime of trauma, social discrimination (stigma), and gender-based violence ('honour' crimes), making most too afraid to seek justice or speak out about their experiences, sometimes even to their families or friends. Some even experience violence and abuse as a result of their actual or perceived attack.

Survivors' fight for their rights extends beyond the courtroom to every home and street in Syria and beyond. Until survivors are given the care, respect and support they so desperately need, international crimes will continue to go unpunished and basic humanity will fall short.

The campaign works to produce content that contributes to enhancing the access of survivors of SGBV to justice and narrating their experiences and challenges that they face. The Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) has therefore worked to produce this series of blogs written by survivors of gender-based violence (during detention), and/or experts in the field and others interested in the justice and accountability processes in Syria.



Nour

(a nickname of a survivor of detention)

A Black Spot

The story began mid-Ramadan of 2013, when we went to check on one of our close activists, who was recently released from detention,

and she told us that our close friend, who had been missing for nearly three months when she crossed from the “liberated” areas to the Regime’s areas and was arrested at one of the Regime’s checkpoints, was martyred under torture, and her family was negotiating to take her dead body.

I was in a state of collapse to hear the news and to have flashbacks in my mind. I cried for three days, as that friend had always been one of the most sincere and active girls among us. With those feelings, I met friends of ours in the “liberated” areas and we were working together, and we talked about her. One of the friends said some words that still ring in my ears to this day, “Why do you feel sad? Only God knows what had happened with her during torture. She is dead, maybe it was relieving for her. I mean, if she is alive and is released, she will die a hundred thousand deaths a day. This is better, be happy.” Those words came down like bullets on my chest, and I was in a state of astonishment and shock, as how can the comrades of the revolution, struggle, awareness, and culture think in such a way?

I remember that I went out of that place, moved away, and cut off any work relationship with that person, until I was arrested exactly a year later, in 2014, when I was arrested from my home, which was not surprising for me, but rather it was expected, as we were not protected, and no one was responsible for what was happening but us!

My First Battle:

Things started like any male or female detainee in the Military Security, with interrogation and torture, and in one of the long interrogation sessions, the interrogator said to me: "Let's talk without using interrogation methods? Let's talk as a young man and woman. I feel sad for you and feel pain that you are here, your place is not here, why did you do that to yourself?" He added, "After your arrest, and you know detention, and what do people talk about it, who would like to marry you?" I answered him: "I'm not arrested for a shameful cause. It's known what the reason of my detention is." He replied: "Are you happy with the terrorism charge? People will not ask about the reason. It's enough for them that you entered the Branch."

I confidently told him: "I don't want to marry a person who does not want me for this reason. I did not do anything wrong, and this was before, under these circumstances our society has become more aware."

He replied with his clear accent: "you have a black spot in your record, life and memory, and it will never leave you."

I remember that day when the interrogation was finished, I was overwhelmed with a wave of laughter; what black spot is he talking about? People no longer think this way. Me and others in the cell used to repeat that sentence and laugh derisively.

The days passed, and after moving among a number of security branches, and the passage of about a year and a half, I lived between the memories of the past and the hope and planning. I drew in my mind dreams, projects, and plans with the "first-

class comrades» as we used to call them. What made us forget the pain and eased the time for us was the longing for the life that lies behind that small door where my great battle began. The awaited moment that I had always dreamed of...behind that small door a beautiful life waits for me!

The Release:

For two days I stayed in Damascus to finish some release procedures, the amount of longing, eagerness and dreams was great for my family, friends, and things, even the voice of our neighbour who was bothering us with his screaming, I had missed it.

When I first arrived at my house, I found a huge number of people, although we did not know anyone in that area, as we were displaced to it due to what happened. I remember at the time that I saw many faces that I did not know, and they came to greet me, but I was looking for the faces of my family members among the crowds.

After the greetings and hugs with my family, the crowd sat down to talk and ask questions. The reactions at the beginning were like "thank God, your face is good, it seems no one hurt you, thank God, you are able to speak." Then, "tell us what happened to you? We hope nothing bad happened to you. Did anyone see your hair? Did anyone hurt you? Nothing could have happened to you if you had not protested!" I did not really know at the time why I had to answer the questions of people I did not know when my family did not tackle those issues!

One of the women said to me after being "reassured" that I had survived the rape: "I told my husband that they imprisoned you.

He said 'be assured. It is only for a couple of months to interrogate her'. He is right; nothing happens inside the detention centres as they say."

I was silent, in fact the social perspective was not surprising to me; I was ready for the general context.

I remember the words of my married friends in detention when they said to me, "Thank God, for you are still a girl (meaning a virgin). Once you are released, you will have a proof of your innocence. You can obtain a medical report from any gynecologist. As for us the married women, no matter how much we swear 'even if we swallow the pages of Koran', our husbands will not believe that nothing happened to us."

Visiting the Doctor:

Indeed, I had to visit the doctor, but this came as a result of the long period of detention, and I needed an urgent visit to the doctor to perform some necessary tests, as for a long time I was suffering from a number of health issues. I asked a relative to book an appointment for me with the family doctor, and as soon as I entered, the nurse surprised me by asking me to take off my clothes, and when I was asked about the reason, she answered "for a gynecological examination!". I thought at first that she did not know the reason for my visit, so I told her that I was visiting to do some medical tests.

It recurred when the doctor came in, which surprised me, and when I refused, he answered me that whoever booked the appointment told him that we wanted a gynecological examination to be reassured that nothing bad happened to me. My

mother intervened at the time and explained that we did not want it, but that was a shock to me, I just cried when I went out, and I was disturbed by the intervention of relatives in these matters, at a time when my family did not ask any questions!

Attempt to be Active again:

I wanted to find a job to fill my time, and since I had been working since the start of the situation with NGOs, I went to a center for the Syrian Red Crescent, and when I applied for work, the director of the center asked to meet me, and asked me why I stopped working for a year and a half, I answered her that I was detained, then came her question, "Did they rape you?" I remember that she told the secretary that I was a detainee, and when I came out, I heard her whispering to her friends about it.

I had a large group of friends and girlfriends, but very few of them contacted me after my release. Most of them cut off their relationship with me out of fear, as people think that anyone released from prison would remain under the Regime surveillance, which is a fact.

I remember when I wanted to go back to the mosque that I used to go to before, the instructor asked me to stop coming and not to conduct any activity because I was under surveillance.

Indeed, after a few days, I was requested to the branch again, and we decided to go to Turkey.

In a New Place:

To reach Turkey, I had to enter the "liberated" areas, and that was a hope for me, and I planned for many projects and dreams, and I

decided to return to work in those areas, but the first reaction was a complete rejection, and I heard phrases such as “How did you come out? How did they release you? Are you a spy to get them information? What happened inside the prison? Did they take off your hijab and see your hair?”

Shortly after my arrival in Turkey, one young man proposed to me, and he was also a former prisoner because he had a similar name to someone wanted by the Regime, as he said, and I remember what he said to me when he saw me: “God, you surprised me, you are laughing and talking normally, I thought I would see a girl with black spots under her eyes, with a tired face and is unable to talk. I have been released for five years, and that left its impact on me, even though I was arrested for only two months.”



Then he said: “I would like to ask you a question: Do you regret that you were an activist? I mean, if you had not been an activist, they wouldn’t have arrested you.

The reason for my arrest is similar names, I was not active.” I replied: “You know, if I could go back in time, I would work even more and would do things I could not do or had postponed, and I regret I did not do.”

I also remember another person who proposed to me as well, and when I refused because of the disagreement between us, and after several attempts, he told my family that he was ready to sit with me and talk if the reason for my refusal was due to what happened to me during my detention.

Marriage Became the Biggest Dilemma:

Between someone «neutral» who doesn’t explicitly support the revolution, and who refuses to mention the experience of detention or is ashamed to talk about it in front of family or friends, and the one who supports the revolution but pity a detained woman and wants to appear as a valiant hero who “cleanse her shame” from a standpoint of ‘find me a former detainee, so I can cherish her (by marrying her)’.

Once, a friend of mine told me about a young man who belongs to the revolution, who wants to marry only a former detainee, or a wife of a martyr. She surprised me when she said, “Frankly, he wants her to be a girl who faced rape during detention, so what is your situation?”

Not to mention those - females or males- who get annoyed because I do not accept any proposal when I feel it is inappropriate, because they think I was arrested, and my chances are few.

My friends also advise me not to mention my arrest, not to miss the “golden chances”, and to treat the matter as any other event

that passes without talking about it. Once, a woman told me that there was a Qatari “groom” who wanted to propose to me: “I know a man who is a Qatari doctor, and he is very rich. How about marrying him for a while, for you to earn money, support, and a number of projects?” I laughed, thinking that she was joking, and she talked shortly later about the same topic. She was shocked when I said that my family did not accept this type of marriage, and that I was not a commodity for sale. Of course, such stories and forms of exploitation are many to exploit former female detainees who are rejected by their husbands or families, so they are selected to make use of their status. There are many friends I know who are married knowing that it is wrong, but they did it anyways to protect themselves and avoid the community gossip about them.

Criticism hits my father when he talks about my detention. They say to him, “Stop talking about the arrest of your daughter, may God protect her. You are harming her reputation, why are you talking out loud? This story is not a pride.”

Stigma, Silence...or Pity:

Since my release, a new suffix has been added to my name. If someone (male or female) saves my name to his/ her mobile phone, my name is saved with the word “detainee” to recognize me.

Not long ago, during my graduation seminar, I wrote a dedication to my detained male and female friends, who are not released yet. My teachers asked about that dedication, and I told them the story. As soon as I finished, I received great criticism from the students who think this topic should not be tackled in

public, because the society “will not accept me.” Sometimes, during discussions, we tackle issues that take place in detention centres or talk about people we met there, but I am always silenced, “Do not mention that, forget that stage, do not you have another thing to talk about?”

Another thing that affects me, in every successful work I do, I receive phrases such as “God willing, despite these circumstances, she was able to do that, God willing, what a will, praise be to God, who compensated her for her past life.” I know that these phrases often come from people out of love, but they often touch me deeply, I have the right to be happy with my success as any normal person, without feeling a bit of pity or courtesy.

All I wish is that society treats me like any normal person, to rejoice and grieve, fail and succeed, feel weak or strong, like any other human being in this world. What happened to me did not make me less of a person, or with less value or dignity, to the contrary. Today, almost five years following my release, I feel I am obliged to present an innocence instrument to prove that no one touched me in the detention center to people I do not know, just because they heard of my arrest.

Apparently, weve come out of a small prison into a big prison...

Situations continue and a phrase that once made me laugh rings in my ears: “It is a black spot.”